

COUNTING LOVE'S TOLL

By

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A S the sun sloped to the west its hot rays lost a little of their fierceness. Mrs. Moriarty, ironing by the open window of the tenement flat, wiped a damp brow and sighed with evident relief.

She laid the underclothes and gingham frocks of her five smaller children, and the shirt-waists of her grown daughter, into separate heaps before turning to sheets, pillow-cases and towels. She had just tested the heat of the iron by the application of a cautious forefinger, previously moistened at the tip of her tongue, when the wearer of the shirt-waists came into the furnace-like room.

"It's late ye are, Sheilah," said her mother, sprinkling anew a sheet. "Turned of seven."

Sheilah Moriarty dropped into the chair nearest the window and leaned her elbows on the table.

"They were changing the notions around, and we had to stay." She looked wistfully about her. "My!

"I'm starvin' for a cup of tea."

Her mother put a cup and saucer from the shelf behind her on the table; and Sheilah, rising, took the teapot from the stove.

"Law, mother! why d'ye work so? I'd let them wear—black. What's the use?"

She leaned out of the window, to reach the butter from the wooden box which served for a refrigerator. Mrs. Moriarty had put two rolls beside her cup, and Sheilah began to cut and butter them.

Her two hands encircled her cup, as her elbows again on the deal table, she relapsed into complete enjoyment of the creature comforts of rest and food. Her pompadoured hair was damply trailing from its proper elevation over brow and temples. Her small oval face, with its egg-like line of chin, its straight, short nose, its black, luminous eyes shaded by thickly growing lashes, began to lose the whiteness born of heat and fatigue, and to flush into the shell pink

"My mother was in service in the cold country," said Mrs. Moriarty, putting the irons on the stove and folding the ironing-blanket. "All the same, Sheilah, what about Pat? Won't ye be flingin' away a good chanst?"

Sheilah shook her head. "I guess there'd be others. But Pat—well, I guess he'd wait. Mother," a sudden passing crept into her voice, "I like him well enough—as much as I ever expect I'll care for any one. But the truth is," she faced her mother defiantly, "I want an easier life than you've had. Here you are, nigh fifty, and working hard! I get all played out at the store, but that's easy to what you do. You're on your feet all day! Three meals, and the dishes, and the washing and the ironing, and the making and the mending. When one thing's done, ya rest yourself by taking up another! I hate to see you live so, and I won't live so myself. No, I like Pat! But I don't like him well enough to slave for him and his children as you slaved for poppe and us."

"You're not slave, Sheilah."

The words came from the open door, and both women turned in some dismay. Patrick O'Meara, in his Sunday suit of pepper and salt, a bright blue tie matching his honest eyes and contrasting pleasantly with his red hair, stood in the doorway, flushed and evidently perturbed.

"Why, good-evening to you, Patrick," said Mrs. Moriarty pleasantly. "My! but it's been warm the day! Sit down. Sheilah, a seat."

Patrick nodded to Mrs. Moriarty, but his blue eyes rested hungrily upon Sheilah's dainty smallness and slimness, as she stood before him, her dark head bent.

"I came to see if ye'd go to the roof garden with me, Sheilah," went on Patrick, laying some roses on the table. He looked wistfully from them to her. If only he could get her away, into the environment of the roof garden, which he vaguely felt to be more

the Hudson, black under the darkening sky, and faint lights twinkled from the distant Palisades.

She listened to his words, rough with the fervor of his love, and drew a long sigh.

"Pat," she said at length, "I don't think I ever did as much thinking as I did before we came up here tonight. We thought it all out, and I've settled that it wouldn't do—it wouldn't do at all. I'd not make you happy after the first, and you'd not make me happy at all, at all. It might be very well, with the rooms you speak of, and the furnishing, and the new clothes, for a while. But a poor man's wife has a hard time—a hard time. Then there's the drag of the children—look at mother!—and there'd be work, work, work. Maybe I'm lazy, Pat. I don't know. Mother says I'm not strong. But I'd just hate the getting up early, to see to your breakfast."

"You never should, Sheilah," urge Pat, with desperate earnestness. "I'd get me own. You'd be till nine o'clock if ye wanted to."

But still she shook the little head he wanted to draw upon his shoulder.

"No, Pat, no. My mind's made up. I'm going to leave the store. I can't stand the long hours, and the being always on my feet, and the lifting down, and the putting back. I'm going to take a real easy place in Mrs. Van Tessel's house. I'll get more money than I do now, and do more for mother. But it's no, and no, and no, to you, Pat, for I couldn't stand it."

The orchestra was playing a popular waltz just then. They stood, enveloped in melody, possessed by sound. It was so loud, so gay, so dominating, that it held them, almost as a thing corporeal might have done. To the end of his life Patrick O'Meara never heard that air without a memory of the sick despair that blotted out the stars from the sky—never heard it without recalling the misery of his conviction that Sheilah truly meant just what she had said.

"I'll not come in, Sheilah," he said, when they stood on the steps of her home. "And I'll come no more at all, unless it may be that ye send for me. Good-night."

Sheilah stood on the steps, watching his burly figure as it strode to the corner, halted and disappeared. Then, with lagging steps, she mounted the stairs and passed into the room where her mother sat and sewed at a pink muslin frock for Moira to wear on Sunday.

As the girl met her mother's inquiring eyes, she said:

"He's gone, mother. I don't rightly know if he's mad with me or not. But I'm going to quit my job Sat'dy, and go to Milly's aunt Monday. It's all fixed about me going. I c'n get ready Sunday."

"I on'y hope ye haven't lost the best chanst of a husband ye'll ever get," replied her mother anxiously. "Ye'll say there's chances where ye goin'. Maybe, Meseif, I'll take more stock in flunkies than I do in store clerks. Pat's a good man."

All the long night, as she lay panting and sleepless by her mother's side, with Moira wriggling uneasily across the foot of the bed, Sheilah seemed to hear these words. They set themselves to her mother's deep breathing, they sang themselves to the gay melody which was the last she had heard at the roof garden: "Pat's a good man."

And "Pat's a good man," she echoed; but added: "But he'd want three meals a day."

The change from her mother's two rooms and the dingy, tawdry splendors of bargain counters, to the magnificence of Mrs. Van Tessel's brown-stone house, was duly made. Sheilah, in uniform of pale pink chambray, white apron, and dainty muslin cap, soon became enamored of her surroundings. She was assigned to a tall, somewhat sour-looking female, who ruled the second floor. A vast and echoing corridor and four bed-rooms were hers to keep in spotless order. But she did not find the work as hard as standing, from eight to six, in the department store. Moreover, she had such fare as she had never dreamed of; a room to herself, small and of nun-like plainness, but fresh and dainty as those she tended. The life was new, was piquant, was delightful.

Once a week she left it to carry her liberal aid to her mother. But she never ascended the dingy stairs without qualms. She was restlessly miserable at the moil and toll in which her mother lived, and indignant at her content—content so ignoble.

And poor Pat? For three weeks he fought out his battles alone. Then, motherless, he fled to Sheilah's mother for comfort, and the bitter-sweet of news of the dear star absent from his clouded sky. Finally, he took a room in Mrs. Moriarty's tenement, for the pleasure of being near her constantly. Only on Tuesdays, Sheilah's night off, did he stay away, wandering up and down Riverside Drive, dreaming day-dreams on the benches and finding solace in the beauties of sky and water.

"Now, don't you lose heart, lad," Mrs. Moriarty admonished him. "It's all very grand, that place where Sheilah is, and her head just turned with it. But it ain't hers! And one day, if she's a woman, she'll want the smallest thing that's her very own. You wait."

He waited for three months. But during that time a change came over him. He visited Mrs. Moriarty so often that he was initiated into the sorrowful mystery of a woman's life. Like many another man, he had wondered, "What the women folks did the whole life-long—them as didn't work for bread?" Now, he saw that they toiled endlessly, at a weary succession of small and often heavy tasks, which sprang, hydra-headed, to full life the moment they seemed vanquished. He would go in at supper-time to see piles of dishes awaiting the "washin'-up." This done, Moira and Mike, both under six, claimed care and attention, if they were to be put cleanly to bed. Clothes had to be looked over, mended, washed or ironed. The day's work was literally never done.

"Why, I'm better off than most," said Mrs. Moriarty, when he spoke of this one night. "I'm busy most part of th' day, but I've children that bring home 'nough to keep us going, and I c'n see 'em gettin' on, too, and on the way to steady lives. Jim'll be in the force, less'n two years, and Dan's at a grocery. Sheilah, she's doing well, if not in the way we wish. And the little 'uns go to school, and don't often play hookey. No, lad, I ain't so bad off."

She was leaning contentedly back in her chair, looking at the glow in the tiny stove. The late November night was chilly, and outside a light rain was falling.

"Anyway," she went on, "it's not when ye youngest is past five that you do haveing yer hard time—I mean, if yer a woman. It's while you're one at the breast, and another dragging at your skirts, and another, or two or three, say, big 'nough to run off, and be at mischiev, and get lost, or into bad company, that

you ache all night, and worrk all day, all day."

She stopped. Her mind wandered back to darker days, and she lost her way in a tangle of gloomy yet sordid memories, fraught with weariness and pain. Pat, the light of the coal-oil lamp falling on his red curls, listened to this intimate revelation with strange emotions. This was a woman's life! To this he had wished—did still wish—to drag his dainty Sheilah! He loathed himself. The whole scheme of creation seemed wrong. It seemed to him now that the rich had the right to wed. And yet his longing for Sheilah was the torment of his days and of his nights, and one evening he set off to the brown-stone mansion of Mrs. Van Tessel, and, penetrating the outskirts of the fortress with some difficulty, found a side entrance, and asked to see Sheilah.

He was shown to a small room in the basement, and bidden to wait. Sheilah came at last, in her pink chambray, trimly fitting, her dark hair, no longer pompadoured, surmounted by a dainty cap, and her slim waist encircled by what might have been a doll's apron. Pat looked at one who has seen a vision. He trembled, twisting his cap in his hands, and looking at her speechlessly. She had always been somewhat of a marvel to him, but never so daintily apart, so heart-achingly remote.

"Why, Pat, I'm glad to see you," she said. "Sit down. Mother told me you've kept well."

"Sheilah!" he implored. "Oh, Sheilah!"

A dim shape of abnegation had begun to form in late in his mind. He saw himself, going solitary all the days, that she might be free of care and trouble. This dim shape melted into mist at the sight of her. Come what might, he wanted her with a passion that seemed to burn in his mind. He could have snatched her up, and carried her away as the Sabine women were borne away. Perhaps if his knowledge of history had afforded him that precedent, Sheilah might not that night have returned to her tiny room under the brown stone eaves. But she did. Convention mastered Pat, and he hardly pressed the little hand she gave him.

She was sweetly gentle. She chatted to him of the splendors of the house, of the numbers of the servants, of the entertainments, the dresses, the reporters, and the reporters' blunders!

"Why, Pat, they said that Mrs. Van Tessel wore blue chiffon and pearls, and all the time it was Nile green mouseline and emeralds! I know, for I was called in to hold down the train while her maids—she has two—sewed some lilies of the valley on it! Oh, Pat! How I'd like to wear the things I see!"

"D'y'e like seein' them, when you can't?" he asked at last. "Don't want to come away from it? I don't want to be the queen of a little place."

"And that matters to you?" Why, Sheilah, seems to me, I'd eat dry bread all my life to be near you."

The girl turned to him sweetly. "Pat, you make me feel so mean! I wish I was like mother. I wish—"

She stopped. She had meant to say, "I wish you didn't care." But, as she looked at the honest, homely face, the clear blue eyes, the red curly head, she could not utter the wish!

"I guess I don't fall in love the way some do," she said slowly. "One of the housemaids here, she's just crazy over the third footman! Sometimes Milly and I get scared she'll make away with herself if we don't notice her. And he won't, because he's just as crazy over the second lady's maid, and she's just as see, she's so above him that he might just as well be in love with Mrs. Van Tessel herself while he's about it!"

Pat felt a pang of sympathy with the stricken housemaid, and a desire to thump the unresponsive footman into a jelly. But another fear awakened within him—a fear for which the footman was responsible.

"Sheilah! The place just swarms with 'em—lives and all! Do you?" He stopped.

But Sheilah's frank smile disarmed his jealous anger.

"Oh, no, Pat. I don't care for any of 'em. I like the comfort of the life. But, when it comes to a man—there's no one I like as much as I like you."

Pat was forced to leave her with that cold comfort.

And for some days he gave himself to hard thinking. Mrs. Moriarty missed him sorely, for he came no

and, just as he was almost elate with the strength and fervor of his resolve, Sheilah came back from Newport, weary of luxury, of subjection, of association on terms of unbearable inequality with the rich and the great.

Her grief at the loss of her little brother and sister—her continual pain at not having been summoned to do her share of nursing, was sincere and deep. She took her old place at the notion counter, and slept beside her mother on the hard straw bed, across the foot of which no Moira now tossed in restless sleep.

But Sheilah was young, and not dead, or stern of fibre. Pat had been the lodestone, after all, to draw her back, and, her tears shed, she looked to him coming with a beating heart.

Her sayings had provided her mother with the mourning out of which the poor, especially the poor of the Old Country, extract a certain satisfaction. Sheilah, more modern, was content with a white chambray and a stock touched here and there with a black ribbon. She knew that she looked well, and she longed to read the old assurance in Pat's eyes.

When he came Mrs. Moriarty greeted him, and then left the lovers alone.

Sheilah lifted shy eyes to Pat's blue gaze.

"Well, Pat, I've come back," she said.

"Your mother'll be glad," she answered gravely.

"She's a good woman, Sheilah."

Sheilah felt the tears dim her eyes. "Sheilah's very good," she agreed. Then silence fell. Sheilah, unable to bear it, crossed to the window, and looked at the line of roofs against the sky.

"Do you remember coming to see me?" she asked at length.

"I guess I don't forget," he replied sheepishly.

Sheilah turned to the window and faced him. "Do you remember what you said about being queen of a little place?" she went on. "Do you know, Pat, I—I didn't think so then, but—now—that sounds nice."

Her cheeks flamed in the gathering dusk. She turned away, to see the sky line, still more sharp and clear, and waited—waited till Pat's slow brain should have realized her words; but Pat stood in dumb agony, holding himself to his vow.

He had no words for her, and Sheilah sank, sobbing into the chair by the table.

"You don't care—you don't," she wept. "Oh, go away, then—go away. Why do you stay to shame me?"

The dignity of his honest intent, the dignity of his own sacrifice, gave Patrick O'Meara the look of a prince. All embarrassment left him. At the sound of his voice, Sheilah lifted her head.

"Ye're not to say I don't care," began her lover. "Ye're never to think that Sheilah, mavourneen. But I've seen your mother's life, and I've seen, in me mind's eye, what my wife w'd be—if I had a wife! Ye've told me, mind a time, Sheilah, and ye've told me true! She's have to wash and bake and scrub and iron. She'd have to rise early and sleep late. And there'd be children—and they make life hard—for the woman! I'll not bring you nor any woman to it, Sheilah. I'll never have a wife!"

He said the words solemnly and Sheilah shivered as she listened. The luxuries she had loved, the trifles that had made her pleasure, suddenly shrivelled away, before the fire of her longing for the man who renounced her, for the clasp of the arms that would not hold her, the touch of the lips that no longer sought to touch hers. She rose, stretching out trembling hands.

"But, Pat—Pat!" she cried. "Don't you see—I—I like you enough, Pat—not to mind!"

He shook his head.

"Not now ye don't mind," he said gently. "I remember what ye told me, Sheilah, once, before ye went to Mrs. Van Tessel's. 'For a time,' ye said, 'the flat, and the furniture, and the new clothes would make it not so bad!' I see that now, Sheilah, though I didn't then. A woman's life—a poor woman's life—is cruel hard, and I'll not bring you to it."

There was a sad finality in his tone that made argument, pleadings, futile. Sheilah stood trembling, her happiness falling in ruins about her, while she, helpless, could but watch its fall.

"I—I like you—enough—not to mind," she whispered.

Pat folded his arms across his breast, that they might not fold her against his own will. While so she stood, the door of the inner room opened, and Mrs. Moriarty came out.

"Ye're wrong, Pat, though it's well enough ye do meanin'," she said, and Sheilah knew by the words that her mother had been living through her own courtship, in listening to her. "But ye think too

